Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.9 No.1 March, 2026; p.g. 169 – 175; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON SPORTS BETTING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH SECURITY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Sports betting has become hugely popular among Nigerian youth, driven by online platforms and aggressive marketing strategies of gambling companies. While gambling can be a form of entertainment, excessive participation exposes youth to moral, social, and economic risks, including addiction, financial instability, and engagement in criminal activities. This study examines the religious perspectives on sports betting in Nigeria, assess its effects on youth security, and evaluate its implications for national development. Using a qualitative approach, insights from Christian, Islamic, and African Traditional religious frameworks were studied to understand the ethical, moral, and social guidance offered to youths. The findings show that religious institutions play a vital role in promoting moral education, offering counseling, and shaping behavioral norms that discourage gambling. The study concludes that a combination of religious moral guidance and targeted government policies is essential to reduce the negative impact of sports betting on Nigerian youth.

Keywords: religious perspectives, sports betting, implications, youth security, national development, gambling addiction.

Introduction

Sports betting has emerged as a rapidly expanding industry in Nigeria, especially among young people. The rise of online betting platforms, mobile applications, and aggressive advertising by gambling companies has made betting easier to access and more socially acceptable, particularly for young people who are often enticed by the prospect of instant financial gains (Okonkwo, 2019:45). The pervasive nature of sports betting is further amplified by the integration of betting advertisements into popular sports broadcasts, social media, and entertainment channels, creating an environment in which gambling is not only visible but glamorized. While the industry contributes to the economy through taxation, employment opportunities, and sponsorship of sporting events, its unchecked growth has generated serious social concerns. Young people engaged in frequent betting often experience financial instability, neglect of educational pursuits, addictive behaviors, and disruption of family and social relationships. In extreme cases, gambling-related stress and debt can lead to criminal activities, such as theft, fraud, or other unlawful acts, as youth attempt to recover losses or sustain their betting habits (Eze, 2021:102).

Religious institutions in Nigeria including Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion play a central role in shaping moral values, instilling discipline, and building communal bonds. These institutions are uniquely positioned to influence the attitudes and behaviors of young people, guiding them toward responsible decision-making and discouraging practices that threaten personal and societal well-being. Through moral teachings, religious doctrines emphasize values such as responsibility, self-control, honesty, and accountability to the community, which serve as effective counterbalances to the appeal and dangers associated with gambling (Eze, 2021:105). Religious leaders and faith-based organizations often provide counseling, mentorship, and structured programs that equip young people with the knowledge and resilience to resist gambling temptations, while also promoting ethical and socially constructive lifestyles.

This paper seeks to examine religious perspectives on sports betting in Nigeria, exploring how these perspectives can influence youth behavior and contribute to broader social and national development. It considers the multifaceted implications of gambling on youth security including economic vulnerability, moral decline, and social disruption while highlighting the potential of religious ethics to reduce these negative outcomes. By exploring the intersection of religion, morality, and youth engagement in gambling, this study aims to provide insights into sustainable strategies for promoting ethical behaviour and protecting young people from the adverse effects of a rapidly growing betting industry.

Religious Perspectives on Sports Betting

Christian Perspective

Christianity generally condemns gambling as a morally questionable and socially disruptive activity. Central Christian teachings emphasize diligence, hard work, personal responsibility, and stewardship of one's resources. The apostle Paul warns that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:10), highlighting the spiritual danger of pursuing wealth through chance rather than honest labor. Gambling is often seen as a threat to moral integrity because it can breed greed, encourage dishonesty, and erode ethical values (Agboola, 2019:88). Beyond personal morality, excessive betting is also seen as a risk to family stability and community cohesion, as it may lead to financial strain, neglect of familial responsibilities, and social tensions. Christian leaders and organizations, therefore, encourage proactive measures, such as counseling programs, youth education, and awareness campaigns to discourage young people from gambling. By highlighting the spiritual, ethical, and social consequences of gambling, Christianity seeks to build a culture of responsible living and ethical accountability.

Islamic Perspective

In Islam, gambling, known as *maysir* or *qimar*, is strictly prohibited because it promotes reliance on chance rather than productive effort. The Qur'an explicitly declares, "O you who believe! Intoxicants and gambling... are an abomination of Satan's handiwork; avoid them" (Qur'an 5:90), establishing a clear ethical prohibition. Islamic scholars argue that gambling undermines social justice by widening the gap between the rich and the poor, encourages financial irresponsibility, and fosters moral decay (Ali, 2018:56). Among Muslim youth in Nigeria, religious teachings act as a strong moral deterrent, emphasizing the duty to earn a living through lawful and honest means. Mosques, Islamic schools, and community leaders often provide guidance and educational programs to reinforce these values, stressing

discipline, self-control, and social responsibility as key virtues in resisting the temptation to bet.

African Traditional Religious Perspective

African Traditional Religion (ATR) places a strong emphasis on communal responsibility, ethical conduct, and maintaining social harmony. Activities like gambling, which promote greed, deception, or antisocial behavior are considered harmful to both individual well-being and the community's stability (Okafor, 2017:37). In ATR, moral guidance is often reinforced through communal teachings, rituals, and sanctions that encourage ethical accountability. For youth, elders and spiritual leaders use storytelling, proverbs, and ritual warnings to discourage excessive betting, highlighting the collective consequences of immoral behavior. By framing gambling as a threat to communal cohesion rather than just a personal vice, ATR fosters a culture that values honesty, fairness, and social responsibility over individual gain through luck.

Implications for Youth Security

Sports betting have significant implications for the security and well-being of Nigerian youth. One major concern is *financial vulnerability*. Many young people, driven by the allure of quick wealth, spend disproportionate portions of their income or personal savings on betting. This often leads to debt, economic exploitation, and, in extreme cases, involvement in petty crimes to recover lost funds (Oluwaseun, 2020:73). Over time, this financial strain undermines their personal stability and their families' economic security.

Another critical issue is the impact on *mental health and addiction*. Continuous gambling fosters psychological dependence, which can manifest as stress, anxiety, depression, and other behavioral disorders. The repetitive cycle of winning and losing money reinforces compulsive behavior, making it difficult for affected youth to stop betting, further jeopardizing their personal safety and social functioning.

Additionally, *criminal behavior* emerges as a serious consequence of gambling-related stress. Young people who experience repeated losses may turn to theft, fraud, or even violence to recover their losses. Such activities pose direct threats to public security and contribute to rising crime rates in communities where gambling is common.

Gambling also undermines *social stability*. It can lead to family breakdowns, strained relationships, and a general erosion of trust within communities. As young people become entangled in gambling, their focus on education, work, and social responsibilities decline, increasing social tensions and weakening community cohesion (Abdullahi, 2020:120).

Religious guidance plays a vital role in reducing these risks. By instilling moral discipline, ethical awareness, and responsible decision-making, religious teachings provide youths with frameworks to resist gambling's temptations. Internalizing these principles helps youth develop resilience against risky behaviors, promoting both personal security and societal stability. Therefore, integrating religious and moral education into strategies to combat gambling can significantly reduce its negative impact on youth security.

Implications for National Development

Sports betting also has significant indirect consequences on national development in Nigeria. One of the most pressing concerns is *Economic productivity*. When young people become addicted to betting, they often divert time, energy, and financial resources away from productive pursuits like entrepreneurship, formal employment, and skill acquisition. This reduces workforce efficiency and overall economic output, as a sizable portion of the youth population becomes less engaged in meaningful economic activities (Okonkwo, 2019:49). Over time, the cumulative effect of widespread gambling can slow national economic growth and make unemployment worse.

Another critical area affected is *human capital development*. Youth who spend excessive time on sports betting may neglect formal education, vocational training, and skill acquisition. This neglect hurts their ability to contribute effectively to national development in the future. A society that fails to cultivate educated, skilled, and disciplined citizens risks stagnation in technology, industry, and public services. In this way, gambling indirectly undermines efforts to build a strong, capable, and competitive workforce.

Furthermore, sports betting has implications for *governance and social cohesion*. The propensity of some youth to engage in criminal behaviors such as theft, fraud, and other illicit activities to sustain betting habits creates extra burdens for law enforcement agencies. Increased crime, along with financial exploitation and social unrest, can weaken the social fabric and strain governance systems, making it more difficult for the government to implement development policies effectively (Eze, 2021:115). Persistent social instability discourages investment, reduces public trust, and slows progress toward national development goals.

Religious institutions play a vital role in addressing these challenges by promoting ethical standards and moral education. Through preaching, counseling, youth mentorship programs, and community engagement, religious bodies help guide young people toward responsible behavior. By fostering values such as diligence, honesty, and prudence, these institutions help align youth behavior with broader societal development goals, thereby reducing the negative impact of sports betting on national development.

Recommendations

1. Strengthening Moral Education by Religious Institutions

Religious institutions in Nigeria should take a more proactive and structured approach to addressing the rise of sports betting among youth. Beyond traditional sermons, they can develop comprehensive moral education programs that emphasize ethical behavior, personal responsibility, and the dangers of gambling. Practical initiatives may include youth-focused seminars, workshops, and fellowship meetings that incorporate storytelling, testimonies from recovered addicts, and interactive discussions on financial stewardship. Community outreach programs can extend moral guidance beyond places of worship to schools, markets, and neighborhoods. By providing consistent moral reinforcement, religious organizations can help young people internalize ethical values, build resilience against gambling temptations, and make informed choices regarding their resources and time management.

2. Regulation of Betting Platforms by Government Agencies
Government bodies, especially the National Lottery Regulatory Commission (NLRC) and other relevant authorities, should impose stricter oversight on both online and offline sports betting platforms. Effective regulations must include stringent age verification protocols to prevent minors from accessing betting services, restrictions on aggressive advertising targeting youths, and mandatory warnings about gambling risks on all platforms. Licensing requirements should be regularly reviewed, and non-compliance should attract clear penalties like fines, license revocation, or legal prosecution. Additionally, cross-sector collaboration between law enforcement, telecommunications companies, and financial institutions can help track and prevent illegal operations, reducing the opportunities for vulnerable youth to engage in unregulated betting.

3. Integration of Ethical Education in Schools
Educational institutions from secondary to tertiary levels should incorporate modules on gambling ethics and social responsibility into the formal curriculum. These lessons should cover religious, moral, and societal perspectives on gambling, emphasizing the consequences of addiction, financial mismanagement, and social disruption. Practical approaches could include case studies of people affected by gambling, role-playing exercises to develop decision-making skills, and reflective assignments that encourage students to evaluate the ethical dimensions of betting in their communities. By embedding ethical education into the school system, students will be equipped with critical thinking tools that enable them to resist peer pressure, make responsible financial decisions, and understand the broader societal impact of gambling.

4. Awareness Campaigns by Media Organizations
Media organizations have a significant role to play in educating the public about the dangers of excessive sports betting. Multi-platform campaigns using radio, television, social media, and print media can raise awareness about the financial, psychological, and social consequences of gambling addiction. Documentaries, talk shows, and public service announcements can feature experts, religious leaders, and recovered addicts to provide credible and relatable content. Collaboration with schools and religious institutions can ensure that messaging is consistent, culturally relevant, and targeted appropriately to different youth groups. The media can also highlight success stories of youth who avoided gambling, providing positive role models and reinforcing socially desirable behavior.

5. Rehabilitation Programs through Religious and Counseling Collaboration
Religious leaders should partner with professional counselors, psychologists, and social workers to establish structured rehabilitation programs for youth struggling with gambling addiction. Such programs could include one-on-one counseling, mentorship schemes, support groups, and skill-building workshops focusing on financial literacy, self-discipline, and ethical decision-making. Holistic approaches that combine spiritual guidance with psychological support can help restore confidence, self-control, and a sense of purpose. Communities can further support recovery by providing mentorship opportunities, vocational training, and reintegration initiatives, helping affected youth move from addiction to responsible, productive participation in society.

6. Community and Peer-Led Interventions

Communities play a critical role in shaping youth behavior, and peer influence can be a powerful tool in discouraging sports betting. Local community leaders, youth associations, and parent-teacher groups should organize peer-led awareness programs where young people educate each other about the risks of gambling. Initiatives such as youth clubs, mentorship networks, and recreational activities (e.g., sports, arts, and skill-building workshops) can provide constructive alternatives to gambling, channeling youthful energy into productive pursuits. Community reward systems that recognize young people who demonstrate responsible behavior or actively discourage gambling can reinforce positive norms. By fostering supportive peer networks and strong community engagement, young people are less likely to fall for the lure of sports betting, creating a culture of accountability and ethical responsibility at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

Sports betting poses real threats to youth security and national development in Nigeria, especially when pursued irresponsibly or excessively. Beyond immediate financial losses, it exposes young people to psychological stress, addiction, criminal behavior, and social disintegration, undermining the stability of families and communities. Excessive engagement in gambling can erode moral values, breakdown of trust within social networks, and increased vulnerability to exploitation, making societal instability worse. The moral and ethical frameworks offered by Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion provide essential guidance in addressing these challenges. These religious teachings emphasize moderation, personal responsibility, stewardship of resources, and the pursuit of virtuous conduct, which collectively discourage gambling, promote ethical decision-making, and build social cohesion. Reducing the negative impacts of youth gambling requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach. Religious institutions must actively engage in moral education, counseling, and awareness campaigns, equipping young people with knowledge and spiritual guidance to resist betting. Educational systems should integrate ethical discussions on gambling, financial literacy, and the social consequences of addiction into school curricula to nurture informed and conscientious citizens. Government agencies bear the responsibility of regulating betting platforms, enforcing age restrictions, and implementing policies make gambling less accessible to vulnerable youth. Community-based interventions, including parental guidance, mentorship programs, and youth empowerment initiatives, can reinforce positive behaviors and resilience against gambling temptations.

Furthermore, sustained public awareness campaigns through media outlets, social networks, and local community forums can educate youth and their families about the long-term economic, social, and psychological effects of gambling. Collaboration among stakeholders (religious leaders, educators, policymakers, community organizers, and families) is crucial in creating an integrated support system that channels the energies and aspirations of young Nigerians toward productive, creative, and socially responsible pursuits.

By harnessing the moral authority of religion, strengthening regulatory frameworks, and promoting community participation, Nigeria can protect its youth from the many harms of gambling, enhance social stability, and create conditions for sustainable national development. In doing so, the nation ensures that its young population contributes meaningfully to economic growth, civic engagement, and the building of ethical, resilient

communities, thereby securing a prosperous and morally grounded future for generations to come.

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